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MINIATURES OF WOMEN

(From the *Greek Anthology*)

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In his vivid account of the mediaeval Latin student's songs, John Addington Symonds insists that the women whose charms are so frankly praised in those rollicking lyrics are of the humblest social class—or of none. The same assertion is often heard concerning the loves—fickle light-o'-loves in many cases—immortalized in the popular *Erotica* of decadent Hellas. But here, at least, there are shining exceptions. And what is more vital, some of the most artistic, as well as most passionate, of these utterances are so elementally human, that they make appeal equally to any time, any land—and to any social station, if that be worth adding. When, indeed was the permanent value of a picture or statue ever determined by the supposed character or social status of the model?

A handful of such typical sketches are here redrawn in English lines. The faithfulness attempted is rather to the spirit than to the form. Indeed, the originals are nearly all cast in the elegiac couplet, a measure which is rarely assayed, and yet more rarely attained, by English versifiers. Perhaps the attempt may be made to illustrate it in rendering the briefest poem of Meleager, editor and star contributor to the first edition of the *Anthology*, and one of the sweetest, saddest minstrels of sensuous passion in any tongue. Short as it is, it sums up a life-story.

Eros, an infant yet, as he lay on the lap of his mother,
Gambled away my life, playing with dice at the dawn.

But ever since Chaucer, rhyme has come to be more and more nearly compulsory in an English love-lyric, original or translated.

In any such selection as this, the voice of Meleager himself must be heard first, and last. He may be writing of a child, or at least, as Longfellow puts it, of

"A thin slip of a girl like a new moon
Sure to be rounded into beauty soon."

in the verses quoted from "The Maid Is Fairer Far":

Already blooms the violet pale,
Narcissus in the watery vale,
Lilies that crown the hills.
Now too Zenophilè, sweet rose
Resistless, as each lover knows,
To her bright blossoming fills.
Why do ye laugh, ye meadows pied,
In the vain glory of your pride?
The maid is fairer far
Than fragrant garlands are!

—MELEAGER

On the other hand, Melitè ("Honey") might be a grandmother: indeed a quite up-to-date twentieth-century grandmamma: or possibly Barrie's mother, sketched in verse by R. L. S!

To slender Melitè tho' near
And nearer with each circling year
Old age approaches, Youth's soft grace
Hath never faded from her face,
Where there oft the color mantles high;
Allurement dances in her eye;
And often still in her appears
The wilfulness of childish years.
For Nature's force,—we've learned this truth,—
Unvanquish'd bides, in age or youth.

—AGATHIAS SCHOLASTICUS, "Melitè Ever Youthful"

There are less courteous Melitè poems, by several hands; but even in this, no stroke should be credited to any chivalric courtesy toward womanhood or age. Such courtly reverence the Greek, of any period, has hardly known. There are indeed descriptions of woman's old age so realistic, and so brutal, as to be hardly quotable. Rather let us set here the record of mild justice meted out by Time to a famous, even notorious, beauty.

I, Laïs, who laughed over Hellas exultant,
Whose porches were packed with the swarm of my suitors,
At Paphia's altar now offer my mirror:
For that which I am I endure not to look on,
And cannot on that which I was!

—PLATO (not the philosopher), "Laïs Grown Old"

An austerer quatrain (originally, a couplet), may have been suggested by precisely the same incident—if it is indeed a real occurrence.

Laïs, whose beauty, once, a rankling dart
Lingered in each man's heart,
Not Laïs, now, but Nemesis appears
Of the fast-gliding years.

—SECUNDUS, "The Yellow Leaf"

The next selection illustrates in somewhat cruder form this same lack of true chivalric sentiment, which has just been emphasized. The lover is quite puffed up by his own magnanimity in condoning so grave a blemish! Of course, any gallant minstrel of Western Europe since the Troubadours could have mentioned the tell-tale tress only to glorify it as a final and irresistible charm.

Her cheek is crystal-clear, golden her eyes.
Even as a crimson flower her mouth is sweet.
In ivory carved her breasts and neck uprise:
More silvery white than Thetis' gleam her feet.
Tho' mid her locks one wisp of grey appear,
—For that grey wisp I'll count her not less dear!

—RUFINUS, "Nevertheless!"

Sometimes this self-satisfaction on the lover's part is carried to a point where it betrays his own deficient sense of humor, while we are filled with vigorous contempt for him. Thus in "But Mine Own"

Philainion's dark, and little, I confess.
But:—curlier than parsley is each tress,
Alluring more than Aphrodite's zone
Her prattle: everything that is her own
She freely offers, no return will claim.
Surely I'll keep her for my constant flame:
—At least, until I find a yet more perfect dame!

—ANONYMOUS

When we come to a purely artistic motif, such as the double charm of beauty plucking at the harpstrings, we can trust ourselves fully to the Hellene's art and feeling. We hardly need be told this is again the master's voice.

With harmonies thy cithara rings:
Deft is thy touch upon its strings:
And whither, O Zenophilè,

Ah, whither should I fly from thee?
 Eroses all about me crowd
 So not a breath am allowed
 To draw with freedom! For thy grace,
 Thy music, or thy perfect face,—
 All these assail me turn by turn,
 Till, frantic, as with fire I burn.

—MELEAGER, "To Zenophilè Playing"

Six or at most eight lines is the Greek ideal for the "Epigram." Within such brief compass, one may hardly expect to find any elaboration of outline, or even any contradictory traits. Yet that too is occasionally illustrated. The name of the beloved, whether real or fictitious, does not necessarily indicate a resemblance to the poetess. This sketch is in fact sixth-century Byzantine, so twelve centuries after the Lesbian's day.

Sweet is my Sappho's kiss, and warm:
 Softly about me folds each arm,
 Snow-white,—but not snow-cold,—full oft.
 Yea, all her dainty frame is soft.
 —Her soul is pure, calm, white as snow.
 Not past her lips may Eros go:
 All else is virginal, too well I know.

—PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, Not Eros' Slave

Perhaps by this time a serious-minded reader may be ready to demand one glimpse at least of unquestionable social respectability. Here it is, then! The lady is beyond reach of cavil or doubt, even if the distinguished authorship claimed by the little poem is not. Perhaps, indeed, a certain serene self-satisfaction may be a bit too much in evidence.

This goddess is the Uranian,
 And not the vulgar Cyprian one.
 To thee the chaste Chrysogonè,
 Iphicles' wife, does homage. She
 Bore to him children, shared his life,
 While every year for man and wife
 Was happier than the last.

Oh Queen,

Thy loyal subjects have they been
 From the first hour. They who the gods adore
 Shall from them in return have blessings evermore.

—THEOCRITUS (?), "At Aphrodite's Shrine"

Clearly, the heavenly Aphrodite, so emphatically differentiated from the vulgar Pandemos, is simply a type and personification of Love itself, indeed of conjugal bliss. The poem illustrates a very wide truth: that simple strong natures, perfectly content with their lot, accept uncritically and unquestioningly so much of the orthodox theology of their day and generation as does not jar upon them—seeing and hearing little of the rest. They are cordially thankful to the Powers that “cast their lines in pleasant places.” Other men may fix the form of rites, even name the Higher Ones, as they will. Many such another prosperous satisfied matron, beneath the glow of a stained-glass window, while the organ peals to lead the congregational singing, is today putting all her heart into some strain like

“Love Divine, all love excelling.”

There is one large question as to Greek plastic art, which must be regarded as settled, scientifically, but yet our feelings and sympathies remain curiously divided. It is the employment of color, more or less realistic, upon the marble statue. The notion that the Greek taste ever preferred dazzling white, or cold neutral grays, except for effective contrasts, is quite belated. And yet, studying a present-day Madonna or saint of colored plaster in a shop window, or even a dainty majolica masterpiece of Della Robbia's school, one feels that the (now uncolored) Melian Aphrodite or Praxitelean Hermes soars above them like Olympus over Tanagra!

The truth is, doubtless, somewhere between. Despite a dozen poems of the *Anthology* itself, the illusion of actual breathing life, or exact imitation at all, is never a proper aim of plastic art. A statue is an idealization, and therefore uplifted on a pedestal, and properly of heroic size. Yet one can hardly doubt that Phidias, and his successors, in some way united sculpture statelier than Michael Angelo's with a feeling for color as adequate as Venice ever knew. The poem here cited may fairly be brought to bear on the archaeological question. Melitè's glowing charms are brought into direct rivalry with the masterpieces of Attic sculpture.

This may very well be again the same Melitè whose roguish eyes so long held Agathias to his allegiance. He and Rufinus

are probably of the same Byzantine group that laboriously, and for the last time, revived this form of poetic art.

Where is Praxiteles, and where are now
The hands of Polycleitos, to endow
The shape they fashion with a living breath?
Who now in wax or marble rendereth
Melitè's glowing eyes, each fragrant tress,
And her white neck's resplendent stateliness?
A sanctuary should this beauty hold,
Even as the shape of some blest god of old!

—RUFINUS, "Melitè the Adorable"

The plastic imitation, which the poet lover would call up the supreme masters to fashion for him, would, evidently, be one that (as these errant poetic art-critics too often say), should lack only breath and speech, and might even be mistaken for life itself. This is not, to be sure, a sculptor's ideal, but it certainly points to something very different from cold white marble alone.

The last lyric to be quoted, which, as was said, can only be one of Meleager's, may at first seem out of place here, as the girl's charms are not described, nor even directly asserted. But neither is Homer's Helen described when she arrives at the Scaean gate. Only, the old men, bereft, hopeless, weary of the ten years' beleaguerment, murmur in their grizzled beards—no reproach for her sin, but—a compliment!

Truly no marvel it seems, if, for such a woman as she is,
Trojans and mailed Achaians for long years suffer in sorrow.

So, with an art no less perfect in its kind, the bee, favored messenger of Hamadryads and gentle Nature-powers generally, forgets the beauty, the fragrance, the precious golden pollen, of the rose—for my lady's more roseate cheek. Furthermore, in its hint of "Bitter-sweet," the little poem utters a truth that every still-baffled artist, as well as every short-lived mortal lover, knows too well.

Oh flower-fed bee, why dost thou seek
To brush my Heliodora's cheek,
Leaving for her the blossoms of the Spring?
Wilt thou reveal to us that Eros' sting

Hath ever for the heart no less
Of unendurable distress
Than honied happiness?
'Tis that, I doubt not, thou wouldst have us know.
Speed back, thou lovers' friend. Long, long ago
We learned, it must be so.

—MELEAGER, "Agro-dolce"

If these ancient lovers, and we, can draw such sweetness even from their sorrow's root, does it matter so much (what we, in most cases, can never know), whether this particular attachment, or that, was pure, devoted on both sides, or conventionally permitted? In the eternal temple of Art, these, like the far more heroic shapes, the Hectors and Andromaches, the Paolos and Francescas,

Are but ministers of Love,
And feed his holy flame.